

Emotion Coaching:

An Essential Part of Your Parenting Toolbox!



**Melissa Benaroya, LICSW, Gottman Educator
West Seattle Preschool Association
March 19, 2012**



To help you identify your parenting style, try the following activity:

Imagine you have just taken your child to the park. As you arrive, your child sees a play structure in the shape of a dragon. Many of the children are playing on it. Your child won't go near it and cries. Your child wants to leave and go home.

Circle the letter next to the statement that describes **your first instinct** of what you think you would do:

- A. You don't understand what there is to be scared of, but you decide to leave the park and try again another day.
- B. You tell your child not be scared and to hurry up and get on the toy.
- C. You are angry that you came all the way to the park on a busy day. You ignore the crying and threaten to take away a toy or treat if your child doesn't play.
- D. You ask your child why he/she is afraid of the dragon. You sit down and talk at eye level. You listen to your child and allow for emotion. You agree to sit on the bench until he/she is ready to play or decides to go home.

Imagine you have a preschooler asking for a snack. You say no because it is too close to dinnertime. Your child starts to whine and says, "I am so hungry". When you turn away your child goes to the cupboard and reaches for a box of crackers. You say no again. To your surprise, your child starts throwing the crackers around the kitchen. Your child throws a temper tantrum and starts kicking on the floor.

Circle the letter next to the statement that describes **your first instinct** of what you think you would do:

- A. You ignore your child. You pick up the crackers and throw them away. You go back to making dinner. You leave your child kicking on the floor. You realize that you waited too long to respond.
- B. You tell your child to clean up the crackers. You send your child to sit on the stairs for a time out and walk away
- C. You let your child kick and scream on the floor. You tell your child to shape up. You say, "I know you aren't hungry". You don't want to be manipulated.
- D. You realize that you have been busy all afternoon. You help your child pick up the crackers. You tell your child that it is not OK to throw crackers. You ask your child to think of another way to wait for dinner.

IDENTIFY YOUR PARENTING STYLE/ TENDANCIES

Research shows that children raised by parents who value and guide emotions do better in many ways:

- They **form stronger friendships**.
- They **do better in school**.
- They **have fewer troubles with 'negative emotions'** and bounce back more quickly.
- They even **get sick less often**.

DISMISSING STYLE

Parent Says: "Get over it!"

"You don't need to be sad. It's not that bad. Put a smile on your face. There's no reason to be unhappy."

Child Feels: Ignored & Unimportant

A child often feels ignored when she has strong feelings. She learns to believe that emotions such as sadness or anger are "bad" and need to be fixed quickly. She doesn't learn how to handle her emotions and has trouble with her feelings when she is upset.

These parents are well-intentioned, but their reactions fall short.

When we dismiss a child's feelings, we:

- Teach her that she can't trust her own emotions
- Model a pattern of dismissing emotions that our child will adopt in her life
- Discourage the child from coming to you when she is hurt or angry or sad.

DISAPPROVING STYLE

Parent Says: "Stop feeling that way."

"You shouldn't feel that way. You have no reason to be sad, and nobody wants a whiner around. If you keep that up, you'll be in trouble!"

Child Feels: Shame

A child feels that something is wrong with him if he gets upset or is sad. He is criticized or punished for showing sadness or anger, even if he does not misbehave. His parents call these bad emotions. Therefore, he feels he is bad. He doesn't learn how to manage his strong feelings.

"Don't be a brat!" Disapproving parents view emotions such as sadness, anger, or fear as unacceptable and controllable. Instead of trying to understand these emotions, they discipline or punish their child for the way he or she feels. The problem with this approach is that emotions simply cannot be switched on or off at will. Trying to make children turn them off can be harmful. Furthermore, the disapproving style does little to help children handle their intense emotions.

Research shows that children raised by disapproving parents:

- Have difficulty trusting their own judgment
- Grow up feeling something is wrong with them
- Often suffer from a lack of self-esteem
- Have more difficulty concentrating, learning, and getting along with friends
- Have trouble calming their emotions and solving their problems

LAISSEZ-FAIRE STYLE

Parent Says: “Anything goes...”

“That’s it, just let the feelings out. Do what you need to do. It doesn’t bother me. Whatever you feel like doing is okay.”

Child Feels: “I’m the King/Queen!” - Indulged but overwhelmed

A child feels comfortable in expressing her feelings and knows that it is acceptable to show emotions whether she is happy, angry, or sad. But there are no limits on her behavior and there is little guidance on how to deal with emotions. She learns that her emotions are okay, but she doesn’t learn how to handle them in appropriate ways.

Many times parents who use this style assume an attitude of total acceptance and non-interference with their children’s emotions. Some parents want their children to know that expressing emotions is a positive thing, and that no matter what their child’s behavior is, they will always be loved. Other parents adopt a “laissez-faire” attitude because they’ve become worn down by their child’s intense emotions, and they don’t have the energy or skills to intervene. It’s simply easier to just give in or let it go.

Although this approach is good in that it shows acceptance for feelings, it stops short. It does not do enough to nurture healthy emotional development. While children do need to *experience* their emotions, they also need help *understanding* them. A critical part of nurturing emotional development includes setting limits on behavior. Children need to learn that their feelings are okay, but not all behaviors are acceptable. Children need to be guided as they learn how to cope with their emotions.

Without the guidance of limits, children in “laissez-faire” homes don’t learn how to handle their emotions. They often:

- Lack the ability to calm down when angry or upset
- Lack “coping skills” when encountering stressful situations
- Find it more difficult to concentrate or learn new skills
- Have more difficulty picking up on social cues, so they find it harder to make and keep friends.

EMOTION COACHING STYLE

Parent says: “I Understand...”

“Tell me how you feel. I’ve felt that way, too. You can’t hit somebody when you’re angry. Let’s think together about other things you can do when you feel this way.”

Child feels: Accepted and Safe

A child feels valued and comforted when all of her emotions are accepted. At the same time, she learns that there are limits on her behavior when she has strong feelings. She receives empathy when upset or angry and guidance in learning to deal with her emotions. She feels comfortable in expressing her emotions and she learns to trust her feelings and solve problems.

Emotion coaching is an approach to caring for children that values their feelings while guiding their behaviors. Emotion coaching takes effort and patience. It’s not necessarily easy—but it’s definitely worth the effort. This approach encourages healthy emotional development so that “children delight in the happy times and recover more quickly from the bad ones.” Using emotion coaching does get easier with practice. It’s like learning a new skill in sports or learning to play a musical instrument. The more we use it, the better we become.

There are times when Emotion Coaching should **NOT** be used:

- 1) When you are in a **hurry** – you will not be effective, and it will probably make matters worse.
- 2) When you are out in **public** or with others and it may embarrass the child.
- 3) When **safety** is more important
- 4) When **you are too upset** to be effective at EC
- 5) When you need to address **serious behaviors**- stealing, hitting, etc (when safety is an issue)
- 6) When the **emotion does not match the situation**- crying when nothing really happened (example-child is tired or hungry)

The Five Steps to Emotion Coaching

- These critical steps have been developed to help us as parents work through issues with our kids.
- The steps are simple, but the application is what is hard-it has to be learned and practiced.
- It is easy for us as parents to “react” to our children. Instead we need to view it or reframe the experience and as a gift every time our child acts out or becomes emotional

1. Recognize lower intensity Emotions

What Can You Do?

- Recognize when your child is upset, sad, afraid, or happy.
- Stand in your child’s shoes when he is struggling with an emotion & see things from his perspective.
- Listen during playtime to find clues about what makes your child anxious, scared, proud or happy.

2. Recognize this as a time to connect with child and for teaching

What Can You Do?

- Pay close attention to your child’s emotions—don’t dismiss or avoid them!
- Think of emotional moments as “opportunities to draw closer” to your child.
- Encourage your child to talk about her emotions and try to share in the feeling yourself.

3. Listen Empathetically and validate your child’s feelings

What Can You Do?

- Encourage your child to share what he is feeling. (*“Tell me what happened/Tell me what you’re feeling...”*)
- Reflect your child’s feeling back to her by saying, *“It sounds like you are feeling _____ .”*
- Don’t dismiss emotions as silly or unimportant. Never criticize your child’s feelings.
- Listen in a way that helps your child know you are paying attention and taking her seriously. (*“You didn’t like it when he said that to you. That really hurt your feelings.”*)
- Share your own feelings, when it’s appropriate.

4. Help child to label emotions

What Can You Do?

- Start to name emotions early—even before your child can talk. (*“Oh, look/sound really mad!”*)
- Work very hard to identify the emotions your child is feeling, instead of telling her what she ought to feel.
- Listen in a way that helps children know you are paying attention and taking them seriously.
- Find a way to show your child that you understand what he or she is feeling—don’t judge or criticize the emotion.

5. Set limits while problem solving (see 5 steps to problem solving)

Five Steps to Problem Solving (Last step of emotion coaching)

1. **Set Limits** – feelings are not the problem, the behavior is the problem. Discuss limits with your partner so that you are coordinated in your parenting (“It’s okay to feel _____, its not okay to do_____.”)
2. **Identify Goals:** Ask your child what he/she wants to accomplish or what they need (Ex- What do you want/need, are you trying to get my attention, the toy, do you want your sister to play with you, etc?)
3. **Think of Solutions:** Allow your child to brainstorm ideas. Help, but don’t take over. – (“Do you want to know what other kids have tried?” Offer some suggestions - some kids” or “what have you done before?” “Remember the time when you....”) With young children under 3 give 2 choices.
4. **Evaluate the solutions** based on your family values- “How would that work for you?” or “What will happen if you try ...?”
5. Allow your CHILD to **choose a solution.**

Feeling Words to use beyond sad, happy and mad:

FEAR Afraid Timid Anxious Scared Worried Terrified Concerned Uneasy Nervous Timid Uncomfortable

ANGER Annoyed Crabby Cross Displeased Dissatisfied Frustrated Furious Jealous Mad Outraged Livid Envious

DISGUST Dislike Hate Loathing Contempt Repulsed by Sickened by

SADNESS Blue Dejected Despondent Disappointed Grieving Dismayed Miserable Regretful Sorry Unhappy Disheartened Despairing

EMBARRASSMENT Shame Humiliated Embarrassed Shy Awkward Nervous Self-conscious Unsure Uncomfortable

INTEREST Amused Excited Eager Engrossed Entertained Fascinated Involved Stimulated Attentive

HAPPINESS Delighted Elated Glad Grateful Loving Happy Pleased Proud Cheerful Joyful

FRUSTRATED

RESOURCES

Helping Our Children:

Raising An Emotionally Intelligent Child Listen by John Gottman

Blessing of A Skinned Knee by Wendy Mogel

Unconditional Parenting by Alfie Kohn

Raising Your Spirited Child by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka,

The Childproof Parent. by Melissa Benaroya and Robin Dowdy

Helping Ourselves:

She’s Gonna Blow: Help For Mom’s Dealing with Anger by Julie Ann Barnhill, 2001. (Parental Anger)

Love and Anger: The Parental Dilemma by Nancy Samalin, 1991. (Parental Anger)

I Swore I’d Never Do That by Elizabeth Fishel, 1994. (Changing Patterns)

Giving The Love That Heals: A Guide for Parents by Harville Hendrix & Helen Hunt, 1998. (Changing Patterns)

You Can Find Melissa at:

Email: Melissa@GrowParenting.com

Website: www.GrowParenting.com or www.MommyMattersSeattle.com

Emotion Coaching and Problem Solving Exercise

Think back to a behavioral issue or challenge that has come up during the last week or two.

1. Describe the problem/behavior you are currently experiencing with your child.

2. Using the 5 Steps of Emotions Coaching and 5 Steps of Problem Solving, how would you work through this scenario with your child?
 1. Recognize the lower intensity emotions –

 2. Recognize this is a time to connect with child and a time for teaching.

 3. Listen empathetically and validate their experience

 4. Help child label their emotion

 5. Set the limit with problem –solving:
 - a. Set the limit -

 - b. Identify goal or motivation of child

 - c. Brainstorm solutions

 - d. Evaluate solutions

 - e. Allow child to choose their solution