



ELSA newsletter 7: Emotion Coaching

We use the Emotion Coaching approach at Godalming Juniors to help the children understand, talk about and begin to manage their emotions. It originated as a parenting technique (developed by [John Gottman](#)) and research has shown that it helps children control their impulses, self-soothe when upset and become more resilient.



During lockdown, our children may be experiencing heightened emotions due to uncertainty, change of routine and physical confinement. These feelings can lead to challenging behaviour such as lashing out. Using emotion coaching will help children understand these feelings and learn new ways to react; you are helping their brain develop and strengthen new connections, similarly, to when they learn a new skill like riding a bike. Emotion coaching teaches the child that while all feelings are acceptable (we all get angry), not all behaviours are (it is never ok to hurt other people), so we need to learn ways to manage them.

Do not dismiss how they are feeling

Gottman looked at [different ways of reacting to children's emotions](#) and found that sometimes we have a tendency to dismiss how a child is feeling, often in an attempt to make them feel better. Sometimes we tell a child "You're OK!" when clearly they are not, or try to jolly them into feeling better with a distraction, without acknowledging or addressing how they are really feeling. This can lead to children doubting how they feel, and does not teach them how to handle the emotion themselves. This short clip from the film Inside Out shows two different approaches to a character feeling sad. Who is showing more empathy?



Inside Out Sadness comforts Bing Bong

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QT6FdhKriB8>

Emotion coaching has 4 steps:

1. Recognise the child's feelings and empathise with them

Be aware of your child's emotions (and your own). Put yourself in their shoes and try to work out what your child is actually feeling, beneath their challenging behaviour. Are they scared, worried, frustrated? How do they display emotions through their body language? What has happened in the lead up to their becoming upset? How would you feel in the situation? Even if something does not seem like a big deal to you (eg losing a game) recognise that it may be for them. The phrase "connect before you correct" can be a useful reminder to empathise first before dealing with the behaviour.

<https://www.gottman.com/blog/emotion-coaching-step-1-empathy/>

2. Validate the feelings and label them

"Name it to tame it"! Say aloud to your child how you think they are feeling, based on what you see or hear: "You're looking really frustrated." "It sounds like you're worried about that." This will help them recognise how they are feeling and widen their vocabulary around emotions. If you are not sure how they are feeling, you can start



with "I wonder if you're feeling....", or make a suggestion and finish with "have I got that right?" They will probably tell you if not!

Name what they are feeling now, rather than telling them how they "should" feel. Eg recognise that they are disappointed they didn't win the trophy, rather than telling them they should be happy for their friend.

As well as naming the feeling, let your child know that you understand why they feel that way. Validate it by letting them know that other people would react the same excessively, or maybe tell them of a time you felt that excessively. It helps them to know that they are not the only person to feel this way!

e.g., "You're really frustrated because you can't get your picture looking how you want it to. It's really hard when we have an idea in our heads and can't quite get it onto paper, isn't it?"

3. Set limits on behaviour if necessary

It is important to understand that emotion coaching does not give a child free rein to do whatever they want! Accepting their feelings does not mean accepting all behaviour. After you have empathised with the child, explain that what they are doing is not ok. "You're angry because you're not allowed on your Switch right now, but kicking the door is not safe," or "I understand that you're really annoyed, but pushing your sister is never ok." Give them a safe alternative - "Come outside with me to calm down," "Squeeze this cushion as hard as you can, then shake it."



If you already have a plan with your child about what they can do when they feel upset, now is the time to remind them of it. "You're looking really angry. Remember we said we'd take 5 deep breaths together before we do anything else." "You're sounding really frustrated with your work. Tearing it up won't help, but remember that jumping on the trampoline made you feel better last time." The aim is eventually for your child to remember these self-soothing strategies on their own, but they need you to coach them to start with.

If you have not made a plan, that would form part of step 4 below.

4. Problem solve with the child

Once your child is calm (which may be much later in the day), talk about what happened and help them think about different ways they could have reacted. What is a safe way for them to handle (e.g.) anger? Where can they go in your house, and what can they do when they feel like that? Help them to come up with their own plan by brainstorming many alternatives together and thinking through the consequences of each of them. Agree a plan for next time they feel that emotion, practise it while they are calm, then help them put in place next time they start to feel that way (eg "When I feel frustrated, I will take a deep breath/count to 5/go in another room to calm down).



This will take time, like learning, any new skill does, so celebrate every success.

More on problem solving: <https://www.gottman.com/blog/emotion-coaching-step-5-helping-the-child-problem-solve-and-setting-limits/>

Useful links:

How to teach emotional regulation : <https://emotioncoaching.ca/how-to-teach-emotional-regulation-ac248808c9f6>

Phrases to use in emotion coaching: <https://nurtureandthriveblog.com/emotion-coaching-parents/>