

EMOTION COACHING

Understanding & supporting children's emotional worlds

Dr John Gottman • Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child



Emotion Coaching is a research-based approach developed by Dr John Gottman following two decades of research with families. The central finding: **how adults respond to children's emotions** has a profound and lasting effect on children's emotional intelligence, behaviour, physical health, academic outcomes and relationships.

Emotion Coaching does not mean accepting all behaviour. It means **accepting all feelings** — and using emotional moments as opportunities to connect, teach and build resilience. There is no such thing as a bad emotion. It's what we do with emotions that matters.

FOUR WAYS ADULTS RESPOND TO CHILDREN'S EMOTIONS

Dismissing

"Just get over it."

Minimises or ignores emotions. Believes negative feelings are harmful and should pass quickly. Well-intentioned but misses the opportunity to connect.

Effect: Children learn their feelings don't matter. Stop trusting emotional experience. Less likely to seek adult support.

Disapproving

"Don't be a brat."

Similar to dismissing but adds judgement, criticism and punishment. Views emotional expression as weakness or bad character.

Effect: Same as dismissing, plus shame. The child's sense of self is undermined. Emotions go underground — they don't go away.

Laissez-Faire

"Just let it all out."

Accepts all emotions with no guidance, no limits and no problem-solving. Believes emotions just need to be expressed and then they pass.

Effect: Children cannot regulate emotions, struggle to concentrate, have difficulty making friends and lack self-control.

Emotion Coach

"I'm here. Tell me more."

Treats emotional moments as opportunities to connect and teach. Accepts all feelings, sets limits on behaviour, helps the child understand and navigate emotions.

Effect: Children develop emotional intelligence, resilience, self-regulation, stronger relationships and better physical and academic outcomes.

THE FIVE STEPS OF EMOTION COACHING

1

Be aware of the child's emotion

Notice what the child is feeling — and what you are feeling too.

Tune in to the child's emotional state — the subtle signals as well as the obvious ones. Anxiety, frustration and fear often show up in behaviour long before they are expressed directly. Awareness of your own emotional state matters too: a depleted or triggered adult has reduced capacity to emotion coach.

In practice: Slow down before responding. Ask yourself: what is the child feeling right now? What might be driving this? Your pause before reacting is itself a form of emotional attunement.

2

See it as an opportunity

Treat the emotional moment as a chance to connect and teach — not a problem to fix.

When a child is angry, sad or overwhelmed, the instinct is often to make the feeling go away quickly. Gottman asks us to flip this: the moment of emotion is not the problem — it is the opportunity. How an adult responds when a child is at their most vulnerable builds (or erodes) trust, connection and emotional intelligence.

In practice: When a child is distressed, say to yourself: this is a teaching moment. This is how I build the relationship. What I do now will be remembered.

3

Listen with empathy and validate

Feel with the child. Communicate that their emotions make sense.

Empathic listening is the heart of Emotion Coaching. Before you redirect, problem-solve or correct — communicate that you understand what the child is feeling and that their feeling makes sense. Not agreeing with their interpretation, not accepting harmful behaviour — accepting the feeling underneath. A child who feels understood becomes open. A child who feels judged shuts down.

In practice: Say what you see: 'You look really upset.' Resist the urge to fix or redirect until the child feels heard. Use: 'That sounds really hard.' 'I understand why that felt so unfair.'

4

Help the child label the emotion

Give the feeling a name — this alone reduces its intensity.

Naming an emotion is a neurological intervention. Research shows that labelling a feeling — 'I'm angry,' 'I feel scared' — reduces activity in the amygdala and increases access to the rational brain. Naming literally calms the nervous system. Building a rich emotional vocabulary in children is one of the most impactful gifts an adult can give them.

In practice: Offer emotion words gently: 'Are you feeling frustrated? Embarrassed? Scared?' Include subtle emotions — humiliation, overwhelm, disappointment — not just big ones. Vocabulary is power.

5

Set limits and problem-solve together

All feelings are valid. Not all behaviours are acceptable.

Once the child feels heard and named, they are in a state to learn. Now you set limits on behaviour and explore solutions together. The sequence is everything: empathy first, limits second. Empathy without limits teaches that anything goes. Limits without empathy teach that feelings don't matter. Together they teach: your feelings are always okay, and we are responsible for what we do with them.

In practice: 'What could we do differently next time?' 'How could we solve this together?' Involve the child in the solution — their agency creates lasting change.

Remember

Emotion Coaching is not about being a perfect adult. It is about being present, curious and willing to stay with a child in their emotional world — even when it is uncomfortable. The child who has one adult who does this consistently is a child whose life is changed.

All feelings valid. All behaviour guided. Every moment an opportunity.

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