



OUR EMOTIONS, BRAIN AND STRESS: Emotion coaching to support health and wellbeing

What is Emotion Coaching?

Emotion Coaching was originally a natural parenting strategy observed by US psychologist Dr John Gottman (1996). He identified that the children of parents who helped children and young people to understand the different emotions they experience, why they occur and how to handle them used what he termed 'Emotion Coaching'. These children were better able to control their impulses and delay gratification, self soothe when upset, have better attentional capacity and increased motivation, performed better academically and were better able to function in social relationships.

ECUK Co-Founders' research took Gottman's five steps of Emotion Coaching and developed a school friendly program that uses four core steps to help engender emotional resilience, empathy and problem-solving skills within children and young people (Rose et al. 2015). Initial findings from pilot projects in UK schools were successful and Emotion Coaching has now been communicated to education professionals, health and social care workers, educational psychologists and GPs in the UK, Europe, Asia and Australia.

Why do we need to focus on emotions?

We all have emotions

Six emotions are identified as hardwired and universal to all by Eckman (1972). These are: Joy, Anger, Surprise, Fear, Disgust and Sadness. We all have to learn to recognize emotions in ourselves and others, to accept that we cannot help feeling them and learn how to manage (self-regulate) them. A key message here is that all feelings are normal and natural but may need to be regulated into more socially appropriate behaviours.

It is now understood that emotions are part of being human and influence how we think and behave (Immordino Yang, 2007). Understanding emotions and learning to manage them helps children to connect and communicate their needs to others and develop a sense of self. They learn how to respond to their emotions (self-regulate) through early

relationships and opportunities for co-regulation (via role models), repetition and trial and error.

Emotions and how our body and mind can regulate stress

Emotions help to switch on and switch off two important human survival systems: our more complex and sophisticated 'social engagement system' (which can access our thinking brain) and our more primitive 'stress response system' (which accesses our primitive survival brain). These 2 systems work together to enable us to socialise, problem-solve and communicate with others when we feel safe and secure (the social engagement system) and spring into survival action if we feel threatened, stressed or unsafe (the fight and flight system).

Humans also have an inbuilt 'surveillance survival system' that constantly monitors our environments and other people to ensure we are ready to respond to threats and danger (Porges, 2011). It helps to coordinate the social engagement system and the stress response system to help us make decisions on how to behave and respond. Although most of the time we are unaware of its influence, the surveillance survival system function develops as we get older and through our personal experiences and environments.

When we feel seen and safe, soothed and secure (Siegel and Bryson, 2012) in our environment and relationships we are able to use our more sophisticated **social** engagement system to tune into and interact with others. When our behaviour and thinking is driven by the social engagement system, we are able to engage in more socially appropriate behaviour, think more clearly, learn new skills and problem-solve. Due to the hierarchical nature of our human survival systems stress response system, we prefer to use the social engagement system. We look to familiar others for reassurance or seek help if possible, if we are unsure or have doubts about our safety.

If there is no reassurance or we perceive (real or not) that we are in danger the more primitive stress response is activated. The body automatically releases hormones that increase our pulse and breathing, increase sugar levels in the blood to give us more energy, narrow our attention to focus on the threat, change our hearing, so it is less tuned to the human voice and more to locating threats. Our thinking and behaviours (fight, flight or freeze) become focussed on our survival with less opportunity to use logic and rationality. Have you ever noticed how difficult it is to talk and rationalize with another person when they are in the middle of an emotional crisis?

This stress response system uses up a lot of the body's physical and mental energies. It originated to keep us alive in earlier hostile environments, when we were under threat from wild animals (such as sabre tooth tigers!). It is meant for short term use and as soon as the surveillance survival system senses that the threat is over, our body systems return to normal functioning and the social engagement system can be reactivated.

We know that some stress can be good for us. Learning to cope with nerves before an exam or a job interview for example, are all emotional experiences that can help, for example, to heighten our focus or sharpen our senses, and ultimately to develop greater resilience in managing stress. However, if we live at high levels of stress or toxic stress for long periods of time, the effects on health can be significant. When experienced above a certain threshold, traumatic childhood events have significant negative impacts on longevity, health and well-being (Felitti et al, 1998). Over time, ignoring emotions, or being unable to regulate them effectively is detrimental to our mental and physical health. Learning how to cope with emotions and developing consistent and effective methods of regulating stress may encourage better long-term health.

Emotion Coaching supports your child's ability to manage stress

Childhood is a time when we learn about what emotions are, how they make us and others feel, how to express them and what to do when emotions/feeling are overwhelming or unpleasant. Emotion Coaching with your child when they are feeling stressed works with the physiology of the social engagement system and stress response system to help them to calm, problem solve and develop more positive social behaviours. Using empathetic role modelling, co-regulation to help them calm, repetition, and opportunities to learn to self-regulate, children learn to understand, manage and problem solve the stresses in their lives. Through this process your child will learn the skills of self-regulation.

How Do We Emotion Coach?

How does Emotion Coaching encourage the process of self-regulation to happen? There are four steps which form a useful and memorable script and guide:

Step One: Recognising the child's feelings and empathizing with them.

This first step does not require physical action, but is the internal acknowledgement of the adult that the child is experiencing an emotional moment. It allows the necessary pause for thought and is important because it gives the adult the time to bear witness to the child's emotions, tune into their own empathy and get ready to act in step two. But it may involve some action such as simply cuddling a child to help them to calm.

Step Two: Validating and labelling with the emotion the child is feeling in the moment.

This step may seem awkward and unnatural at first. Watching an angry person enacting their anger and telling them that you can see that they are angry may seem patronizing and unnecessary. But research tells us that just by naming the emotion the other person

is feeling, we are encouraging the regulatory processes to engage and reconnecting the thinking brain with the limbic system (Lieberman, 2013). By being with the person as they are experiencing a heightened state and through naming that emotion, we are communicating that a) we understand how they are feeling and b) it is ok to feel like that. This explicit is a vital step and without it, effective Emotion Coaching cannot happen. The acknowledgement and validation of feelings can help a child's brain to feel heard and soothed. You don't always have to state categorically what emotion the child is feeling. You can be more inquisitive and tentative but this still communicates that you understand, that you empathise with the feeling and that you are here to help. You might say 'I wonder if you're feeling fed up about not going outside. I can understand how that might feel. I get frustrated too'.

Step Three: Set the limits

It's important to recognize that just because you have demonstrated empathy and validation in Step Two, Emotion Coaching isn't about ignoring the fact that some behaviours aren't acceptable. What Emotion Coaching practice is striving for is the understanding that behaviours are telling us that something isn't right – our quest is to find out about the emotions that are driving the behaviour. However, as Steps One and Two help you identify and empathise with the emotion, Step Three allows you to put some limits on the behaviours, if necessary.

A positive and empathic way of doing this is to simply state what is the acceptable behaviour or what you would like to see your child doing in this scenario. For example, 'when we have had enough to eat we can put our cutlery on the plate and/or take our plate to the sink' rather than "we do not throw food around the room".

A good example of this would be to consider a sad seven-year-old who has just hit out at a friend. Acknowledging the child's sadness identifies you as an understanding and empathic adult and as the child begins to calm, stating, 'I understand you're feeling really sad today, remember one of our golden rules is kindness, so 'we use kind hands when we are with our friends' becomes perfectly logical. This is the key to Step Three: making clear which behaviours are and are not acceptable.

Step Four: Problem Solving

Emotion Coaching endeavours to teach resilience and step four is important to reinforce the idea that children and young people have the capacity within themselves to develop self-regulation skills to cope with their own emotional worlds. In step four, the Emotion Coaching practitioner works with the child to consider what they could do when they feel those strong emotions next time. Wherever possible, new solutions should be driven by the child or young person, but there are times, especially when the child is new to the process, when some ideas will need to be given about how to control their temper or manage their fears. For example, 'I wonder whether it would be a good idea

to go to the special beanbag in the corner next time you feel like this? Then I can come and help you figure out how to manage your frustrations next time.'

Importance of adult emotional regulation

Another important point that is key to the process of Emotion Coaching is your own understanding, attitudes and beliefs about emotions and how they should be expressed. The emotional world of the adult involved in Emotion Coaching is as important as the emotions being experienced by the child or young person in their emotional moment. Emotion Coaching works best when emotional moments are approached by the adult in a calm and well-regulated manner. Demonstrating calm in tone, words and body language is important – you are modelling the behaviour you want to see. This of course, is often easier said than done, especially when coping with behaviours that are anger inducing and time is limited. You can't co-regulate if you can't self-regulate!

Be aware of how you feel when your child is experiencing strong emotions. Where do you notice it in your body? It might be appropriate to mention or highlight this to your child as this provides an opportunity for modelling how to understand and manage strong emotions.

For example; 'Mum is feeling quite tense right now, my stomach is churning, I'm frowning and I'm probably shouting a little. I'm not going to be able to help you when I'm feeling like this, I need to calm my body down. I'm going to stop doing what we're doing, take some deep, slow breathes so my brain knows that I'm safe and it's ok to be calm. Could you help me by taking some deep breaths with me?'

A final thought

Often, personal reflections and changes to the way in which address behaviours occur through several weeks or months of practicing Emotion Coaching. At ECUK we fully recognise 'you need to practise to improve practice'.

References

- Ekman, P. (1972) Universals and Cultural Differences in Facial Expressions of Emotions, In Cole, J. (Ed.), *Nebraska Symposium of Motivation*, (pp. 207-282). Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press
- Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., ... & Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. *American journal of preventive medicine*, 14(4), 245-258.
- Gottman, J. M., Katz, L. F., & Hooven, C. (1996) 'Parental meta-emotion philosophy and the emotional life of families: Theoretical models and preliminary data'. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 10(3), 243-268.
- Lieberman, M. (2013) *Social: Why are brains are wired to connect*. New York: Crown Publishers

ECUK Introduction to Emotion Coaching Scenarios

Immordino Yang, M. & Damasio, A. (2007) We feel therefore we learn: The relevance of affective and social neuroscience to education. *Mind, Brain and Education*, 1(1), 3-10

Porges, S. (2011) *The Polyvagal Theory. Neurophysiological foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communication and Self-Regulation*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Rose, J., McGuire-Snieckus, R., & Gilbert, L. (2015). Emotion Coaching-a strategy for promoting behavioural self-regulation in children/young people in schools: A pilot study. *European Journal of Social and Behavioural Sciences* 13, 1766-1790.

Siegel, D., & Bryson, T. (2012). *The whole brainchild*. New York: Random House

