

FAMILY • SERVICES

Anne Kangas, LCSW, Family Services Director
Mandala Children's House 5/2005

EMOTIONAL COACHING

Helping Children Deal with Their Feelings

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**.

Tolaris Research Institute in Seattle, Washington (www.talaris.org) is dedicated to creating tools that help parents raise their children effectively. They scour the world for information with practical applications for parents. Their book, *What Am I Feeling?*, is based on Dr. John Gottman's work on raising emotionally healthy children. It teaches parents how to be effective at emotional coaching. Here are some of the highlights of this significant little book.

IDENTIFY YOUR PARENTING STYLE

How do you handle your child's emotions? Most of the time, the way we handle our children's feelings matches our own attitudes about emotions. Dr. John Gottman has identified four parenting styles. Most parents tend to use one style more often than others (even though they may use other styles during the course of a week).

The DISMISSING Style

Ignoring "Bad" Emotions"

"Just get over it!" Some parents believe the best way to deal with children's emotions is to tell them to ignore their feelings and put on a happy face. They tend to dismiss children's feelings because they don't think they're important or don't know what else to do.

These adults often feel uncomfortable if children are sad or angry. They believe negative emotions are harmful or unnecessary, and they should be avoided. As a result, they might dismiss the emotions, try to "fix" children's moods, or try to distract them from their feelings.

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

When we dismiss a child's feelings, we:

- Risk diminishing the child
- 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.

When we value and guide a child's emotions, many benefits follow, including a much closer relationship.

There is no such thing as a bad emotion. It's how we handle our emotions that matters.

• 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.

The DISAPPROVING Style

"Bad" Emotions Are Punished

"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.

Karina is angry and about to cry. Her mom, who thinks she just wants attention, disapproves of her anger and wants to get her to change her feelings. "Don't be a brat, Karina." Karina starts to cry. "Stop it right now. I said stop it!" More crying. "That's it! If I hear any more crying, you'll be in trouble." More crying, of course. Now, not only is Karina angry about something, but she's also going to be punished for the way 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

• 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.

The LAISSEZ-FAIRE Style

Emotions Without Guidance

"Laissez-faire" is a French expression that means "let it go" or "let it be." It describes the parenting style of some parents who 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.

• 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.

The EMOTIONAL COACHING Style

Empathy and Guidance

Emotional coaching is an approach to caring for children that values their feelings while guiding their behaviors. Emotional 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 emotional 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.

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 when you fell 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.

Five Steps to Emotional Coaching

1. Be aware of your child's emotions.

The first step towards helping a child learn about emotions is being aware of what a child is feeling. This awareness begins with you. Parents who understand their *own* emotions are better able to relate to their child's feelings.

Sometimes it's hard to figure out our children's emotions.

Your job is to try to see the world through your child's eyes and to uncover the emotion. Watch body language and listen closely to identify feelings. Help your child learn about her feelings.

EMOTIONAL AWARENESS

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.
- Share your emotions, when it's appropriate.
- CAUTION: your child is learning about emotions by watching YOU and how you handle your own feelings!

2. Recognize that emotions are an opportunity to connect.

Emotions are new and sometimes overwhelming for young children. They need adults to teach them how to handle their emotions in a healthy way.

The best time to teach children about emotions is *during the experience* when the feelings are real. This means sharing the moment of feeling sad or feeling angry with a child *before* those feelings grow to a high level. Talking about feelings helps reduce their intensity. “Talking it out when you are upset” teaches children that issues can be handled when they are small, which is a key problem solving strategy. If children can learn this skill when they are young, they will be better able to manage stress later in life.

CONNECTING

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.
- Share your own feelings, when it's appropriate.
- Tell your child her feelings are okay...and then offer guidance in sorting out those feelings.

3. Listen with empathy.

Two of the most important steps parents can take to help their children deal successfully with their emotions are *listening with empathy* and *supporting a child's feelings*. Comforting children with their feelings reassures them that they are not alone and lets them know their feelings are okay.

The best way to help children understand their feelings is to put their feelings into words with simple statements. Reflecting children's feelings back to them is extremely comforting ("*Oh, that made you really sad.*") It also helps them feel like someone is 'on their side.' Using reflective listening puts the parent in a better position help the child find a solution to the problem.

LISTENING

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.*")
- Find a way to show your child that you understand what he or she is feeling. ("*So you don't want to play with him any more today. You just want to play by yourself.*")

4. Help your child name emotions.

Children don't always know the words to talk about what they are feeling. They don't know how to make sense of complicated emotions that overtake them, like jealousy, hurt, fear, or worry.

Research shows that when children can *name* their feelings, they can handle them better. Naming emotions helps different brain areas communicate with each other, which in turn helps children calm themselves. This process is called learning "emotional regulation," which is a critical coping skill needed for managing life's up's and down's.

Naming emotions can be tricky. Children can feel mixed emotions, just like us. It takes a little detective work to identify exactly what a child is feeling. Ask 'door-opening' questions, look for clues in a child's tone of voice, and watch body language. The wonderful thing about children is that they are very, very forgiving. If you try naming an emotion and you're off-base, they'll let you know ("*No, I'm not sad...I'm mad!*") Children desperately want to be understood, so if you just keep listening, they'll keep trying to make clear to you what they are feeling.

NAMING EMOTIONS

What Can You Do?

- Start to name emotions early—even before your child can talk. ("*Oh, you're 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 and find good solutions.

Learning positive ways to express emotions is an important life lesson. The challenge for parents is to accept children's emotions while setting limits on children's inappropriate behavior.

Setting limits is the first step in any good problem-solving. Once adults have made clear what children shouldn't do, the next step is helping kids come up with what they can do to solve their problem. This teaches children to find their own solution to problems.

Problem-solving can take some practice. First, help your child figure out what his **need** is or what he wants. Next, help him **generate his own ideas** about how he could solve the problem: *“What do you think you could do? How could you get someone to play with you?”* Try not to judge your child’s ideas at this point. Lastly, talk about how his ideas will work. Try to **ask ‘thinking questions’** rather than making critical comments. (*“How do you think that would work?”* rather than, *“That will never work!”*) Then, help your child **pick an acceptable solution**.

Example: Child makes a hurtful comment to another child in the sandbox.

Parent pulls child aside, out of the sandbox.

Parent to child: *“That hurt Timmy’s feelings! We don’t use hurting words. You sound pretty upset.”*

Child: *“I wanted to play with that truck but he got it first.”*

Parent: *“You really want a turn with that truck.”*

Child: *“Yes!! I saw it first, but he got it. It’s not fair! I want a turn!”*

Parent: *“I can see that you’re really frustrated! You don’t think it’s fair that he got it first.”*

Child: *“Yeab...”*

Parent: *“You want to play with that truck, too. What could you do to make that happen?”*

Child: *“I could go take it from him.”*

Parent: *“Well, that’s one idea...do you have any other ideas?”*

Child: *“I could see if he wants to share it...or I could ask him if he wants to see my new hot wheels car.”*

Parent: *“Or, you could ask him if you could play with the truck when he’s finished....?”*

Child: *“I guess so...”*

Parent: *“Let’s see...which do you think you want to try?”*

Child: (Child starts to walk away...towards the other child in sandbox) *“I’m going to see if he wants to play with me.Hey, Timmy, do you want to see my new car?”*

In this example, the child has solved his problem with facilitation from an adult. His parent has named and accepted his emotions, while giving a clear limit on his negative behavior. His parent encouraged him to figure out what he wanted to do, without imposing her solution. In fact, he showed he felt “finished” by seeming satisfied and walking away from his parent, and no longer feeling upset.

FINDING GOOD SOLUTIONS

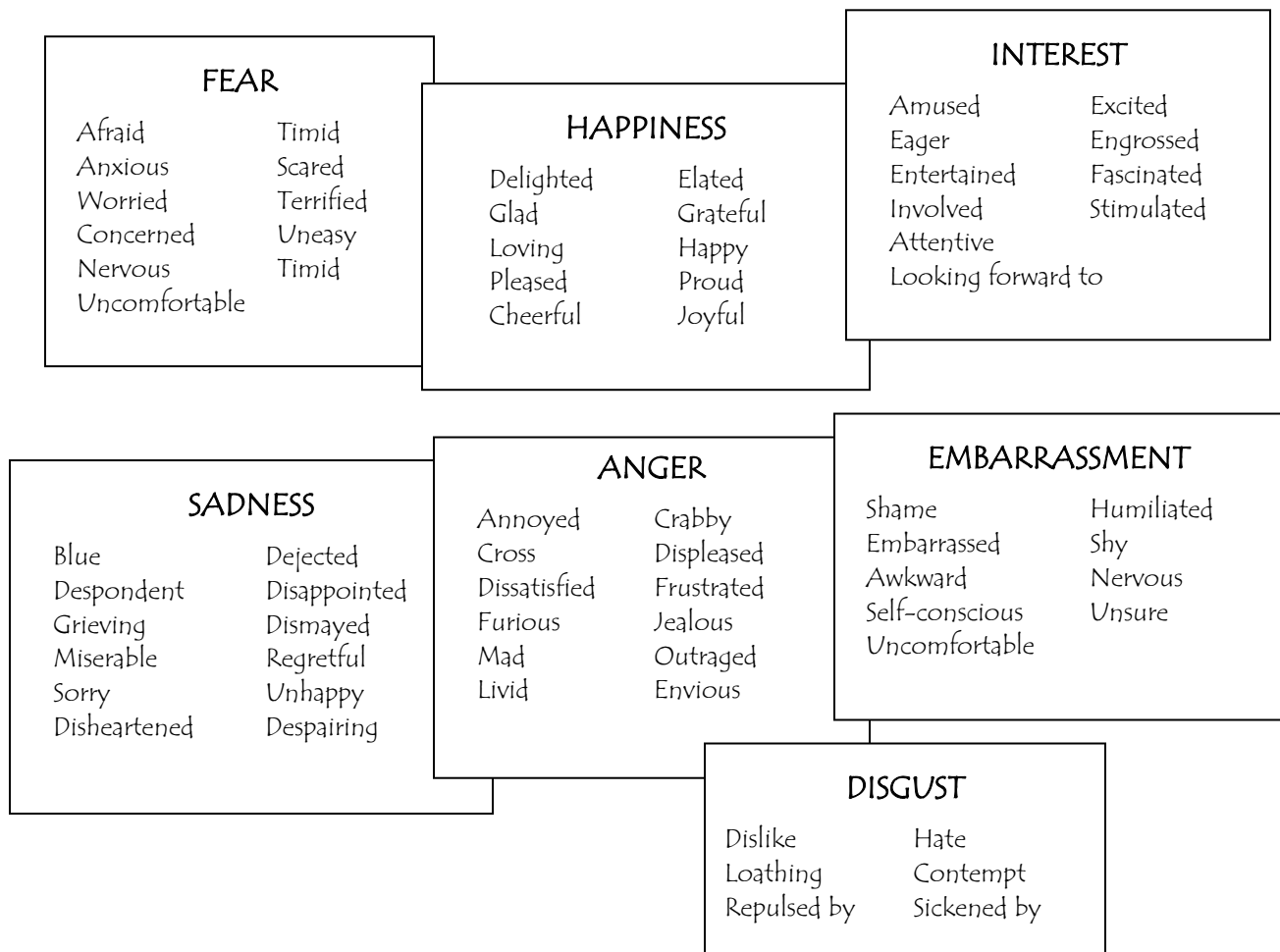
What Can You Do?

- Discipline misbehaving children for what they *do*, not for how they feel.
- Use misbehavior as a ‘teaching time’ to help your child understand his emotion: give that feeling a name and explain why the behavior was unacceptable.
- When your child has a problem, help him: (1) think about what he wants to see happen, (2) think of several ideas for doing this, and (3) pick a solution.

SOME FINAL TIPS:

- ❖ Be patient.
- ❖ Be honest with your child.
- ❖ Avoid making critical, humiliating comments or mocking a child.
- ❖ Build on small successes to boost a child’s confidence.
- ❖ Be aware of a child’s needs, both physical and emotional.
- ❖ Identify what a child enjoys and what she doesn’t enjoy.
- ❖ Avoid “siding with the enemy” when your child feels mistreated.
- ❖ Empower a child by giving choices and respecting his wishes.

Do you need some words for different FEELINGS?



Source: John Gottman, Ph.D. and Tolaris Research Institute, *What Am I Feeling?*

Helpful Books on Managing Emotions

Helping Our Children:

- How To Listen So Kids Will Talk and Talk So Kids Will Listen* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish, 1999.
- Dealing with Disappointment: Helping Kids Cope When Things Don't Go Their Way* by Elizabeth Crary, 2003.
- The Highly Sensitive Child* by Elaine Aaron, Ph.D., 2002.
- Raising Your Spirited Child* by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka, 1991.
- Taming the Dragon in Your Child* by Meg Eastman, Ph.D., 1994.
- The Explosive Child* by Ross Greene, Ph.D., 1998.
- No More Misbehavin': 38 Difficult Behaviors and How To Stop Them* by Michele Borba, Ph.D. 2003.

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)

