

## Parents Are Children's Emotion Coaches

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At a recent workshop we asked parents to share something about their children that they were really proud of - not in terms of accomplishments, but in terms of behaviors they have been working on. This distinction is important.

You no doubt feel proud if your child makes the honor roll or sinks the winning basket in an important game. These are indeed accomplishments. Sometimes, however, our children's greatest growth is revealed in the less obvious and less heralded moments.

"Sometimes my son tells me he hates me when he flies off the handle," a parent shared. "As you can imagine, it's really hard to hear."

She went on to say that it has been difficult to know what to do. She has to do the work of sifting through her own intensely emotional responses to get to the place where she could communicate an important message to her son. "Your anger isn't the problem, but how you are expressing it is hurtful." They worked on it. And worked on it.

Then she shared one of her proudest moments. "Recently he went into a meltdown and started stomping around the house. I heard him storming up the stairs when all of the sudden he stopped. It was quiet for a moment, and then he shouted 'I don't hate you. But I am really angry!'" The rest of us in the parenting workshop nearly burst into applause – for both the little boy and his mom.

This parent could have shared a less vulnerable story, perhaps one that had a flowery resolution. Something like, "My son rarely melts down anymore and when he does he hugs me and tells me I am a good mom." Instead, this parent was willing to describe a real life episode. Her son still loses his temper. He is still working on emotional regulation. But he made a giant leap on that staircase. For the first time he was able to pause and make a choice about how he was going to express his anger and frustration.

That is something to be really proud of.

### **You are your child's emotional coach**

Whether you knew it or not, you became your child's emotional coach the moment he

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or she was born. Teaching children how to manage intense emotions is an important- and challenging- parenting responsibility. It entails helping them understand their own emotions *and* those of others in order to make good choices. Impulse control and emotional regulation are core executive function skills that improve as their prefrontal cortex matures. But children don't learn these skills on their own. They require practice from early childhood all the way through adolescence and they look to caregivers and other adults as their guides--their coaches.

University of Washington professor John Gottman coined the term "emotion coaching" when he found that children whose parents help them regulate their emotional worlds were more confident, happy, and successful. He argues that it can be easy to address misbehavior without attending to the underlying emotions. When we do this, we miss an important opportunity to build our children's emotional regulation, a skill that ultimately helps them make better choices in the future.

Mary Sheedy Kucinka also emphasizes the importance of emotion coaching in her book *Kids, Parents, and Power Struggles*. (Put this practical book on your reading list!) In her years of experience as a parent educator, she has found that when parents claim their role as emotion coaches they are able to turn would-be power struggles into learning opportunities.

So what does emotion coaching look like? Here are five steps to get you started:

1. **Listen.** Pay attention to your child. What are they doing? What are they saying? What are they trying to communicate to you by their words and/or behaviors?
2. **Name your child's emotions.** "Maria I can see that you are very frustrated. Is that right? Yeah. You are really frustrated."
3. **Validate the feeling.** "It makes sense that you are frustrated. You want to go to your friend's house now but there isn't time before dinner. Are you feeling angry with me for not letting you go now?"
4. **Address the poor behavior.** Emotion coaching doesn't mean letting kids get away with inappropriate behavior. In fact, setting and enforcing clear limits and consequences is an important strategy to help kids regulate their emotions. "It is okay to feel angry and I know you were looking forward to hanging out with Veronica. But it is not okay to throw all your books on the floor. You can take some time to calm down. Then please pick your books up off the floor and put them back on the shelf before dinner. If you choose

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not to pick your books up then you are choosing to not go over to Veronica's tomorrow."

- 5. Work together to come up with different ways to deal with those feelings.** At a later point you can process what happened. "Next time you feel that angry with me what could you do differently? What could you have said?" With very young children it is helpful to give them the words: "You can say 'Mama I am frustrated. Please help me!'"

Emotion coaching also begs us to think harder about the source of powerful emotions. Was it really about going to a friend's house, or was it that someone said something really mean to her on the way home from school? Was it really about your son not wanting to pick up toys or was he exhausted and hungry after a long day at preschool?

How you express your own feelings either escalates or diffuses the power struggle. Part of being an effective emotion coach means modeling emotional regulation. Of course, this is easier said than done. Here are some tips for your own emotional regulation:

- **Adjust your expectations.** Know your child's developmental stage and/or their specific abilities. Having unrealistic expectations for what your child is capable of sets everyone up for failure. It is unreasonable to expect eighteen-month-olds to be able to calm themselves, identify their emotions and come up with words on their own to express their feelings.
- **Take a break.** With older children, it is okay to take a break and come back to the issue. "I am too angry right now to talk about this. Let's take a break and discuss this in fifteen minutes."
- **Know your triggers.** Are you most likely fly off the handle if nothing is ready in the morning and you are late getting out the door? Create systems that reduce your stress in those predictably tense situations.
- **Apologize if you need to.** "I was really frustrated that you weren't listening to me earlier when I asked you to turn off the computer and come to dinner, but I shouldn't have yelled at you like that. I am sorry for yelling."

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