

Emotion coaching for children

Emotions come and go. They are like the weather! We can't dismiss them easily. They are there to be felt and to be known. They give us valuable information about our surroundings and ourselves. We can develop emotional coaching for ourselves and others which become sound emotional hygiene.

Children can have extreme emotional outbursts to quite minor triggers as they learn the difficult task of managing their own emotions. It is not their fault, it is how the human brain is hard-wired, so we can help them greatly by giving them the tools to regulate their own emotions.

They will over-react many times, so we can help them find the teaching moments to assist them in managing their emotions so they can better problem solve. We do this again and again until they have learned it.

Key is to first acknowledge, empathise, then validate, normalise, name the emotion, have compassion and then problem solve. This emotional coaching is something we can model ourselves so we can better help our child to promote emotional intelligence and more resilience(see handout on emotion self-coaching)



1. Recognize the emotion: Learn to recognize your child's emotional reactions to certain triggers. It is also better to intervene before the emotion becomes too intense as it is easier for your child to think more clearly when the emotions are just arising. So as we begin to notice our child becoming emotional we can first ask questions like: "what is happening to you now?", "What is upsetting to you now?", "how do you feel now?", "What is the feeling that is here for you now", "Are you feeling angry now". Use a calm, slow, quiet tone of voice. Your children learn about managing their emotions from watching you and listening to you and your tone of voice.

You can also explore how this feeling feels in the body and mind asking: "Where do you feel this emotion in your body? How do you feel the anger in your body? Is your chest or belly tight? What are you saying to yourself about this? And so on...

2. Recognising the struggle, Acknowledging that emotions are difficult and unpleasant, indicating a time of struggle. This is a moment of mindfulness. Saying something like: "This is difficult", "ouch this hurt", "this is stressful", this is upsetting".

3. Normalise: Sensitively, recognising our common humanity, that is, many people in similar a situation would feel those emotions or react in this way. Saying this not in a dismissive way but more as an acknowledgement that we are not alone but that we are together in feeling those difficult emotions. Saying when appropriate: "in a similar situation, other children would feel like that", "it is a normal way to react". Another way to validate and normalise the emotions is to add: "There are times when I felt like that in the past" or "in a similar situation I would have felt like this as well".

4. Naming the emotion: Being aware of the emotion and then naming it gently as a way of pointing out that they themselves are more than this emotion. This emotion is only one part of them, not the whole of themselves. They can become the observer of their emotion.

Children have a limited vocabulary of feeling words so it is helpful to find the best word together. Saying "This is anger or disappointment or frustration, isn't?" whatever is relevant. Checking with them: "Is



that right? Is it what is here for you and how it feels for you?”, “Which emotion is here for you?”, “Is this anger?”, “Is this how anger feels?”.

5. Setting limits and problem-solving. It is not the feeling that is the problem but sometimes it is our reaction that causes the problem. Remembering that we are more than our feelings, we can notice our feelings and then decide to act in ways that are helpful and constructive, according to our good intentions.

Once we are clear on the emotion, we can set the limits on how to manage them. For instance, you can say to the child: “ It is not okay to bite your brother because he took the toy and you were angry. What are the other ways to deal with this situation? Can you use words to say how you feel?”

Along with the triggers look for other influences that could be impacting the behaviour of the child such as being tired, hungry, in need of water, sick, in pain, feeling left out, and so on. These stressors increase the possibility of a meltdown.

So then focussing on how to manage the feelings by using “ breathing out”, “ belly breathing”, “being present using the 5 senses to be in the here and now”, “hug and another soothing touch” “coming into the body, feeling the feet touch the ground”.

Helping the child to explore the solutions by asking gentle questions such as: “what does this feeling need now?” or “what are the ways to deal with this”, “what would you do next time?” Asking how this situation could be resolved in a positive, constructive way.

If the child feels sorry, encouraging them to say sorry and find ways to correct their ways.

This advice is of a general nature only and does not take into account particular conditions. For further assistance contact a psychologist.

This handout was written by Marie Bloomfield, Clinical Psychologist, M. Psychol., MAPS. July 2019.

Website: www.bloomfieldpsychology.com.au Or www.mindfulpath.com.au

For more information please email marie@bloomfieldpsychology.com.au