

The Five Essential Steps of Emotion Coaching Dr John Gottman

Step 5: Set limits while helping the child to problem solve

Step 4: Help the child to verbally label emotions

Step 3: Listen with empathy and validate the child's feelings

Step 2: Recognise the emotion as an opportunity for intimacy and teaching

Step 1: Be aware of the child's emotions

The Five Essential Steps of Emotion Coaching

Emotion coaching is an evidence-based strategy based on the research of psychologist John Gottman. It is an approach that adults can use to help children and young people to recognise and understand the different emotions they experience, why they occur and find ways of dealing with them (Gottman, 1997). Research suggests that emotion coached children are better able to control their impulses, delay gratification, self soothe when upset and pay attention. Furthermore, the impact of emotion coaching means that children and young people:

- Achieve more academically in school
 - Are more popular
 - Have fewer behavioural problems
 - Have fewer infectious illnesses
 - Are more emotionally stable
 - Are more resilient
- (Gottman, J; 1997)

The Five Essential Steps of Emotion Coaching are summarised below.

Step 1: Be aware of the child's emotions

- Take time to get to know how the child expresses different emotions- what are the signs? What do you notice about their facial expression, body language and tone of voice that suggest they are feeling a certain way? It can be useful to observe emotions being experienced in different contexts e.g. with peers, during imaginative play, when listening to a story or watching a film or television programme.
- Sometimes the signs are clear and obvious, particularly when the child is distressed. However, lower intensity emotions such as disappointment or frustration may be less so.
- With practice, and over-time, you will find yourself better able to tune into the child's emotions before they escalate.

Step 2: Recognise the emotion as an opportunity for intimacy and teaching

- The second essential step involves the adult recognising the emotion as an opportunity for intimacy and teaching – rather than responding in a way that is disapproving, dismissive or avoidant e.g. “Forget about it” “Try and think about something else.” “That’s nothing to worry about.”

Step 3: Listen with empathy and validate the child’s feelings

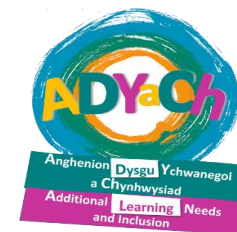
- Show that you understand how the child feels and validate their feelings.
- This communicates to the child that all emotions are accepted and natural and helps them feel less alone with their feelings.
“I can see you get angry when that happens. I would feel angry if that happened to me. It’s normal to feel angry.”
- It is important to emphasise that although we accept an emotion it does not mean we accept inappropriate behaviour:
“I understand that you are feeling frustrated but we can’t behave like that- it’s not safe.”

Step 4: Help the child to verbally label emotions

- Help the child to recognise the emotion being experienced rather than telling them how they should feel.
- Try to avoid asking the child why they feel like this – even though this feels like a very natural question to ask. Asking why is not always helpful because often the child doesn’t know the answer or doesn’t have the emotional literacy skills to communicate their feelings through words.
- Naming emotions can help tame them – “Name it to tame it” and can also help build the child’s emotional vocabulary.
- Being curious and taking a wondering approach about the emotion being experienced can sometimes feel less threatening – *“I’m wondering if you are feeling happy/sad/frustrated/nervous because....”*
- Remember we might not always get it right and the child may not understand our words. However, our tone of voice and body language will communicate that we are trying our best to understand.
- It can be helpful to wonder and notice all kinds of emotions. It is also useful to talk about your own emotions when you can- model labelling emotions and the signs you are picking up on in the body e.g. “Ooh I’m feeling nervous about the meeting in work – I’ve got a bit of a stomach ache.”

Step 5: Set limits while helping the child to problem solve.

- The response during this step will depend on the child- their ability level and emotional state at the time.
- You may need to set limits on behaviour first. As mentioned earlier although all emotions are accepted this does not mean all behaviours are – *“These are the rules we have to follow, doing that is not ok.” “We can’t behave like that- even though you are feeling annoyed- because it’s not safe.”*
- When supporting the child to problem solve you may need to offer a solution to start – *“Why don’t we use the sand timer so you can see how much time you have left to play?” “This isn’t a safe place to be angry, let’s go to a safe place to talk.”*
- Alternatively the child may benefit from having some structure to help them problem solve, so you might choose to give them some options – *“You need to sit next to Emma or in front of me, which do you want”*
- If you feel the child can cope with more open questions these can help them to reflect on the situation and come up with solutions, or ways of dealing with similar situations in the future, differently, *“How do you think you’ll react if this happens again?” “Next time you start feeling like this what could you do?”*
- If the child is in a heightened and distressed state (fight/flight/freeze) the priority is safety and giving them time to recover. At a more calm and appropriate time you can help the child to problem-solve.



References

Gottman, J. (1997) *Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child*. Prentice Hall & IBD

Rae, T. & Schu, A. (2017) *Emotion coaching: A Resource bank for parents, carers and professionals*. The Nurture Group Network. The quotes that appear in the text are from this resource.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7KJa32r07xk>

