



## INTRODUCTION

### What is Emotion Coaching?

Emotion Coaching was originally a parenting strategy observed by US psychologist Dr John Gottman (1997). He identified that children who were parented through this strategy were 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.

Dr Janet Rose and her colleague, Louise Gilbert, identified that supporting the development of such traits would be a useful addition to the school environment. They 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 around the UK.

### Emotions, health and the brain

Six emotions were identified as hardwired and universal to all by Eckman (1971). These are: Joy, Anger, Surprise, Fear, Disgust and Sadness. It is important to recognize the importance of emotions and the message that we cannot help feeling them. This is what makes us human and ignoring them or failing to regulate them can have significant impact on our mental and physical health.

Emotions are also closely linked to our physiology. It is often easy to think about emotions as belonging to the realm of our brain alone, but the central nervous system is made up of both the brain and the spinal cord – what you register in your brain as an emotion will be felt in some way in your body. Hence the importance of the stress response system for our physiological and mental well-being. This system works like a continuum, with one extreme reflecting a calm, balanced person in a well-regulated state and the other being an individual in a fight or flight response. In the flight or fight mode, the heart rate has increased, physical systems such as digestion are on hold to ensure that all potential energy resources can be redirected to our muscles; we are

tense, hyper-vigilant and ready for action. Our bodies use the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems to regulate the processes needed to create a stress response in our physiology and also to calm it down again.

Perspectives on the stress response system (autonomic nervous system) have developed in recent years and now it is felt that our autonomic nervous system has not two but three branches. (Porges, 2011). The third system is known as the social engagement system and fosters interpersonal connection and responds to relational conditions. This is the most recently evolved part of the stress response system and due to the hierarchical nature of the stress response system, is the part we seek to use first. We look to others for reassurance or seek help if possible if we are unsure or have doubts about our safety. If our social engagement system does not help us to feel safe, the fight/flight/freeze response is activated.

We know that a moderate amount of 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 help us develop resilience. However, if we live at high levels of stress or toxic stress for long periods of time, the effects on health can be significant. The longitudinal Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACE Study (Felitti et al, 1998) explored the number of traumatic, stress related incidents in childhood and the effect on later health. They found that when experienced above a certain threshold, traumatic childhood events have significant negative impacts on longevity, health and well being. While this study explores the effects of trauma on health, it could be argued that learning how to cope with emotions and developing consistent and effective methods of resilience may encourage better long-term health.

Emotion Coaching is based on the latest research from physiology and neuroscience. Brains learn through creating connections between neurons. New experiences change our brains and increase the numbers of connections. Through repetition of experience or action, these connections can become stronger and faster. It is well documented that London taxi drivers have larger hippocampi than others. The amount of learned information required to pass The Knowledge Test to be the driver of a black taxi in London has meant that this area of their brain has created more connections. In the same way, repetition of an action thousands of times over creates connections between neurons that are strong and incredibly fast. Think about Andy Murray and his tennis serve – his brain is hardwired to make that shot through thousands of hours of practice. So it is with other areas of learning, including emotional experience – the more opportunities we have to experience strategies that help us to regulate our emotional world, the better we will be at regulation because our brains will have made the necessary connections. It is not hard to imagine however, that some children and young people have had very limited opportunities to develop such strategies and may find their emotions overwhelming.

If we see the brain as being divided into three sections, the first and earliest to develop in evolutionary terms, is the base of the brain, where our reflexive actions such as breathing lie. The next section is the midbrain, which includes the limbic system and which contains the amygdala. This is the home of our fear response and other emotional responses are thought to be focused in this area. The final, third section is the cortex and this structure covers the top of the brain in two hemispheres – it is responsible for the thinking needed to carry out tasks and mental representations of ideas and processes. It is the thinking, cognitive brain. Of particular importance to Emotion Coaching is the pre-frontal cortex, a band that straddles the front of the brain and that links very closely to the limbic system via millions of synaptic connections, ensuring that our emotional and rational brains are closely linked. These connections are manifold and resilient in people who have experienced effective emotional regulation strategies through early experience.

### **What do we do when we Emotion Coach?**

When a person is experiencing an emotional moment, Siegel (2010) suggests that they ‘flip their lids’, or in other words, the synaptic connections between the thinking, rational pre-frontal cortex and the emotional limbic system are lost. Emotions take over. 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 is because their thinking brain is disengaged and Emotion Coaching encourages the person to re-establish the connection between their thinking brain and emotions. Only then can they regulate, calm down, reduce their heart rate and take part in a discussion about the situation rationally. Until this reconnection occurs, talking is often ineffective. If you are working with an individual who has strong connections between the limbic system and their thinking cortex, it will probably be a lot easier to help them regulate. For those with fewer or weaker connections, learning that process of regulation can be much harder and take more time because building new connections takes time and practice. Emotion Coaching aims to reaffirm connections between the emotional limbic system and the thinking cortex and make them stronger, and to encourage the development of new connections. This is learning in its most basic sense and what it takes most of all, is practice.

### **How Do We Emotion Coach?**

How does Emotion Coaching encourage the process of 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.

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

It 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. By being with the person as they are experiencing a heightened state and through naming that emotion, we are communicating that 1. We understand how they are feeling and 2. It is ok to feel like that. This explicit is a vital step and without it, effective Emotion Coaching cannot happen.

**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 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, but one of our golden rules is kindness, so hitting your friend isn't an ok thing to do' 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 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. 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.'

## Meta-Emotion Philosophy

A final idea that is key to the process of Emotion Coaching is that of the Meta-Emotion philosophy, or in other words, recognizing that 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 gives practitioners the opportunity to explore their own emotional world as they encourage the development of resilience within others. 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 one is coping with behaviours that are anger inducing and time is limited. However, the impact of personal regulation and effective empathy are manifold and will be discussed more in training. Often, personal reflections and changes to the way in which behaviours are addressed occur through several weeks or months of practicing Emotion Coaching. Although it is an overused term, when committing to becoming an Emotion Coaching practitioner, be prepared for an unexpected, and hopefully enlightening, journey about your own emotions and automatic responses.

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## References

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