

# THE FIVE KEY STEPS FOR EMOTION COACHING

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from Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child by John Gottman, PhD, 1997

Emotion Coaching provides a framework for parents to teach their children ways to handle their feelings. This will positively impact their children's lives by helping to increase their "emotional intelligence". Children with high emotional intelligence are better able to self-soothe, bounce back from difficult situations, control impulses, delay gratification, read other people's social cues, and cope with life's ups and downs.

The foundation of Emotion Coaching is empathy, which is the ability to understand and feel what another person is feeling.

## The Five Steps:

1. **Being aware of the child's emotion;**
2. **Recognizing the emotion as an opportunity for intimacy and teaching;**
3. **Listening empathetically and validating the child's feelings;**
4. **Helping the child verbally label emotions; and**
5. **Setting limits while helping the child problem solve.**

### Step 1: Being aware of the child's emotion

To become aware of their children's emotions, parents have to develop their own emotional awareness – the ability to recognize when you are feeling an emotion, to identify the feelings, and to be sensitive to the presence of emotions in others. This does not mean that you have to be an emotionally expressive type of person – we all experience emotions internally but we don't always give ourselves permission to feel or express our emotions. Expanding our comfort zone with the entire range of emotions – anger, sadness, fear, joy – will help our children do the same. The key is to become aware and when you do express your own emotions you do so in ways that are not destructive.

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

The fact that your child is angry, afraid, or sad is not a failure on your part, something you need to fix, or proof that something is wrong with your child. Instead, it is a chance to help teach and model healthy ways to deal with feelings and an opportunity to develop a closer relationship with your child as they view you as an ally.

### Step 3: Listening empathetically and validating the child's feelings

Here is the most important step – empathic listening! Pay attention to your child’s body language, facial expressions, and gestures as he or she talks, and then reflect back what you are hearing and noticing in a calm, non-critical way. Sharing simple observations rather than asking pointed questions will keep the conversation open. Talking a little about your own, similar experiences can also show understanding. When you are listening do not criticize, lecture or give unsolicited advice, as all these actions will not help your child feel understood. Offering advice too quickly, even if well-intentioned, can detract from the emotions and misses an opportunity for your child to learn to develop emotional intelligence and begin problem solving on their own, with your help as needed.

#### **Step 4: Helping the child verbally label emotions**

Sometimes children need our help in identifying what they are feeling and doing so can have a soothing effect on the nervous system. This doesn’t mean telling your child how to feel, or even deciding what it is they are feeling. Label the emotion in an open, tentative way that gives your child the chance to determine if it fits.

#### **Step 5: Setting limits while helping the child problem-solve**

After listening and helping your children identify and understand their emotions, an opportunity for problem solving often occurs. This process can have five steps: (1) limit setting; (2) identifying goals; (3) thinking of possible solutions; (4) evaluating proposed solutions based on your family’s values; and (5) helping your child choose a solution.

##### **(1) Limit setting**

Certain behaviors are not appropriate and cannot be tolerated. It is important for children to understand that all feelings and wishes are acceptable, but not all behaviors are, so a parent’s job is set limits on acts and let the child know the consequences for breaking or following the rules. Children respond best if consequences are consistent, fair and related to their misbehavior.

##### **(2) Identify goals**

Once the emotions are acknowledged and accepted, and you know what happened that resulted in the feelings, you can move on to “What can be done about this problem?” Ask your child what he would like to accomplish related to the problem at hand.

##### **(3) Think of possible solutions**

This brainstorming process will differ depending on your child’s age but your job is to assist your child, without taking over, to generate some ideas.

##### **(4) Evaluate proposed solutions based on your family’s values**

Consider each idea separately helping your child answer the questions “Is this solution fair? Will it work? Is it safe? How am I likely to feel and how are others likely to feel?”

(5) Help your child choose a solution

At this point you want to come up with a concrete plan of action. Later, if you discover that a solution to a problem doesn't work, analyze why and start problem solving again. We learn as much from our mistakes as from what works.

**Additional Emotion-Coaching Strategies**

- Avoid excessive criticism, humiliating comments, or mocking your child
- Offer specific praise for each step taken, followed by a little added instruction that builds success incrementally
- Be aware of pushing “parental agendas” (usually tied to your anxiety your child) which tend to focus on character and not the behavior at hand
- Develop a mental map of your child's emotional world
- Avoid “siding with the enemy” when listening
- Translate your child's situation to adult terms if you need to create greater understanding for yourself
- Resist the urge to prematurely jump into problem solving or advice giving
- Empower your child by giving choices and respecting wishes
- Share in your child's dreams and fantasies
- Be honest with your child – don't fake it
- Be patient with the process – all new habits take time
- Understand your base of power as a parent – if you are an Emotion Coach your authority comes partly from the emotional bond with your child
- Above all else, just remember to listen, listen, listen!

**When Emotion Coaching is NOT Appropriate (and should be postponed)**

- When you're pressed for time
- When you have an audience (privacy is best)
- When you're too upset or too tired for coaching to be productive
- When you need to address serious misbehavior
- When your child is “faking” an emotion to manipulate you