SUPPORTING CHILDREN IN DISTRESS:

The Power of Parental Emotion Coaching

by Allen Sabey, Ph.D.

Imagine the following scenarios:

A 3-year-old girl begins yelling in a grocery store because her mother said she cannot have the cereal she wants.

An 8-year-old boy comes home from school crying about how a friend said he did not want to be the boy's friend anymore.

A 14-year-old girl's grandmother just passed away and she hasn't come out of her room for three days.

A 16-year-old boy argues with his parents about not letting him stay out later with his friends.

These types of emotional moments in children's lives shape their ongoing development and future well-being. More specifically, it is in the accumulation of these moments that children learn about their emotions and how to deal with them (Sroufe, 2000). What children learn from these experiences will either support constructive ways of dealing with their emotions, or hinder their ability to manage their emotions in healthy ways. The experiences children have in this regard are largely influenced by how their parents or caregivers respond to them in such moments of distress (Cunningham, Kliewer, & Garner, 2009).

THE IMPORTANCE OF RESPONDING WELL TO CHILDREN'S EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

The tenor of the emotional environment in which children are raised has life-lasting effects for them (Valliant, 2012; Waldinger & Schulz, 2016). This emotional environment influences children's brain development and their ability to regulate their emotions (Cassidy, 1994; Perry, 2002; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). *Emotion regulation* can be defined as "the ability to respond to the ongoing demands of experience with the range of emotions in a manner that is socially tolerable and sufficiently flexible to permit spontaneous reactions as well as the ability to delay spontaneous reactions as needed" (Cole, Michel, & Teti, 1994, p. 76). In other words, emotion regulation is the process by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them and

how they experience and express them (Gross, 2013).

For example, a child's emotion regulation skills can be observed by what a child does when he or she feels sad — whether he or she can express that sadness in a constructive way, or suppresses and hides the sadness. Healthy emotion regulation abilities are critical, because they affect a child's cognitive abilities as well as the quality of his or her interpersonal relationships (Calkins, 1994; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000).

Although children are born with different emotional temperaments, the ability to appropriately manage difficult emotions is not an innate ability that some children are born with and some are not (Goldsmith & Davidson, 2004; Kiff, Lengua, & Zalewski, 2011; Mirabile, Scaramella, Sohr-Preston, & Robison, 2009). It is primarily learned through accumulated experiences, especially experiences early in life. Children learn how to regulate their emotions through the process by which their parents or caregivers respond to their distress (Davidov & Grusec, 2006; Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998; Fabes, Leonard, Kupanoff, & Martin, 2001; Kopp 1989). Children deal with emotional distress in healthy ways to the extent that their parents or caregivers help them deal with their distress in healthy ways.

Children can often feel overwhelmed and confused by their strong emotions. Their brains are not yet developed with the ability to calm themselves, think through a situation or experience and decide how to best respond (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Children need to feel emotionally and physically safe to feel, explore and understand their feelings (Sroufe, 2000). How parents respond to their children's negative emotions will shape how their children deal with those emotions and how they act when they are distressed.

Research with preschoolers, elementary school-age children and adolescents demonstrate that the ways parents respond to their children's emotions is strongly related to children's social behavior, internalizing symptoms and behavior problems (Katz & Hunter, 2007; Katz & Windecker-Nelson, 2006; McElwain, Halberstadt, & Volling, 2007; Shipman et al., 2007; Stocker, Richmond, Rhoades, & Kiang, 2007). When children are emotionally distressed and their caregivers ignore, dismiss or criticize them, children become confused and unable to manage their uncomfortable emotional experiences in healthy and constructive ways. For example, if a child is feeling sad but does not have anyone who understands and empathically talks to him or her about this feeling, it would not be surprising for the child to misbehave or act defiantly (Cavanagh, Quinn, Duncan, Graham, & Balbuena, 2014; Dunsmore, Booker, & Ollendick, 2013).

EMOTION COACHING FOR CHILDREN

One approach that can help parents respond to their children's distress in a healthy way is called *Emotion Coaching* (Gottman, Katz & Hooven, 1996). This approach has received strong empirical support and is encouraged by many current parenting experts (Havighurst, Wilson, Harley, Kehoe, Efron, & Prior, 2013; Lunkenheimer, Shields, & Cortina, 2007; Markham, 2012; McDowell, Kim, O'Neil & Parke, 2002; Siegal & Bryson, 2011). This approach can be described in four steps:

First, parents need to see their children's emotional distress as an opportunity to connect with them (Gottman et al., 1996). Parents often do not want their children to feel painful emotions. Although this sentiment is well-intentioned, parents' efforts are often wholly focused on stopping their children from feeling whatever it is they are feeling. Parents may use a variety of strategies to do this, including ignoring the distress, distracting (e.g., "ooh, look at this book over here!"), reframing ("Your sister didn't really mean what she said") or rationalizing ("It isn't a big deal. You have plenty of other friends"). Although some of these might be helpful after the child is calm, in moments of distress, the parent's goal should be to help the child understand what they are feeling. Children who are helped in this way learn to become resilient as they face emotional challenges throughout their lives (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Connecting with children in these moments will also promote children's ability to follow parents' instructions and advice. Internally, a child will feel, "Since you care about what I am saying and feeling, I will care about what you are saying and feeling."

Second, parents can help children name their feelings (Gottman et al., 1996). It is useful to label the emotion out loud for two reasons — first, so the child knows the parent understands what he or she is feeling, and second, so that he or she learns that what he or she is feeling has a name. For example, a parent might say, "It looks like you are really sad," "I can see that you are pretty mad right now," or "You're kind of scared of that, huh?" This step requires parents to be attuned to what their children are feeling. They must be aware of and able to accurately read their children's emotional cues. Here's a list of some basic negative feelings to identify and name: angry, sad, hurt, afraid, confused, upset, disappointed, worried, discouraged, guilty, lonely and ashamed.

Third, validate the feeling (Gottman et al., 1996). Children need to trust that their parents will be there for them no matter what they are feeling. To do this, parents should put themselves in their child's shoes and express their understanding of the child's distress. Parents should tell the child that they understand *why* he or she is sad (or mad, or scared) by using the word "because." For example, "You're sad because you really wanted that toy, huh? That toy looks really cool and special and fun. That would probably make me sad too if I couldn't have a really fun toy that I wanted."

It is important to note that all children's feelings are acceptable, because feelings provide important information about what is happening in the world. Some parents may believe that the way a child is feeling is irrational or immature, and that by validating and understanding the feeling, it will make matters worse. However, telling a child *not* to feel something (e.g., "Don't be sad", "There's no reason to be upset") rarely makes a child feel better. In this step, parents should avoid telling the child to "look on the bright side," or trying to logically explain to the child why he or she should feel differently. Rather, feeling understood in the hard moments is what will help the child feel comforted and be able to calm down. Validation is soothing. As a result, children feel less confused and learn they can trust their feelings as helpful information. They will also feel more connected, and more likely to come to the parent when upset in the future. It is also important

that parents learn to empathize with children's positive emotions. Sharing joy and fun with parents is crucial for children's development (Ginsberg, 2007; MacDonald, 1992). Expressing admiration or pride in children's efforts and achievements and participating in enjoyable activities together are some simple ways that parents can express empathy for children's positive emotions.

However, if a child is pretending to feel something, parents should avoid validating the pretend emotion. Instead, understand and talk about why the child might be pretending. For example, a parent in this situation might say, "It seems like you are being dishonest with me because you're really kind of scared or embarrassed about something."

Finally, problem solve together (Gottman et al., 1996). Once the child's feelings have been identified, parents need to help the child meet his or her emotional needs. One way to do this is to initiate a conversation with the child about what could be done to help the situation. When considering various ways to make the situation better, parents can prompt their children to come up with possible solutions themselves. For example, parents can ask something like, "What do you think we should do now?"

Parents can also offer ideas or suggestions, such as providing a hug when sad or offering support when a child needs to confront a difficult situation. This step is important, but should be taken *only* after the child has felt validated, has calmed down and can reasonably think about what might be helpful in the situation.

EMOTION COACHING IN THE CONTEXT OF CHILDREN'S MISBEHAVIOR

Although all children's feelings are acceptable, not all of their behaviors or actions are. Children need to learn that what they are feeling does not inevitably dictate what they do. Emotion coaching does not equate to permissiveness. If a child has misbehaved or acted in an inappropriate way, parents still need to hold clear expectations for appropriate behavior. A challenging task is for parents to evaluate and decide what their child needs, especially when that happens to conflict with what the child wants.

Children are most likely to demonstrate appropriate feelings and behavior when parents are both highly warm and consistently firm. Validating a feeling does not imply that a parent must give in to a demand or desire. For example, if a child does not want to go to school, a parent can work to understand and validate why the child does not want to go to school, while still requiring the child to go to school: "School is tough sometimes, especially when kids are mean and you feel left out. Feeling left out is probably one of the hardest feelings ever, huh? I think I probably wouldn't want to go to school if I were you, too. But I can't let you stay home, because school is really important. What do you think we can do to help make going to school easier for you?"

CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING EMOTION COACHING

Emotion coaching is often difficult for parents, because parents must understand that children's distress is an opportunity to teach them better ways of managing their

emotions. This may feel unnatural and uncomfortable, especially if it was not role modeled by one's own parents. However, with practice it gets easier and feels more natural.

If parents have difficulty managing their own negative emotions, it will be particularly challenging for them to help their children with negative emotions. Children's intense negative emotionality can often trigger parents' difficult emotions from the past, making it hard for parents to calmly accept and acknowledge their children's experience (Hoffman, Marvin, Cooper, & Powell, 2006). If parents' own parents were critical, dismissing or uncaring in the face of their emotions, they will need to have patience with themselves as they learn to calmly accept and work through their child's difficult emotions.

Another potential challenge to emotion coaching is children's unique personalities and emotional needs. Some children are born with a more difficult temperament, which means that they may be more difficult to soothe or more prone to anxiety (Buss, 2011; Goldsmith & Davidson, 2004). These children require more patience and perseverance from their parents as they deal with those difficult emotions.

Finally, factors such as poverty, discrimination, single parenthood or other difficult life situations can create additional stress for parents, which in turn makes it more challenging for them to remain calm and emotionally connected with their children. Parents in these situations should seek support where available, and trust that any effort to emotionally connect with their child will be beneficial. Parents will never perfectly coach their children through all their emotions in every situation. Rather, being "good enough" as a parent is good enough.

CONCLUSION

Children need parents who can be both sensitive and strong in the face of their emotional distress. To do this, parents need to acknowledge their child's negative feelings and respond with empathy. Finally, in all of this, parents need to consider the age and development of their children, as children will need different types of responses at different stages of development (Klimes-Dougan et al., 2007).

In conclusion, let's revisit some of the scenarios described earlier, to illustrate how emotion coaching might work in those situations:

To the 3-year-old girl screaming in the grocery store, a possible emotion coaching response could be: "You really, really want that cereal, don't you? That cereal is really good, and you love it, and so it's not easy when you really want it and you don't get it. That makes you pretty angry, huh?"

To the 8-year-old boy who is crying about perceived rejection from a friend: "You are really sad because your friend hurt your feelings, huh? I've had good friends who weren't always kind to me too. What do you think you could do?"

To the 14-year-old girl whose grandmother just passed away: "You're grieving because you loved grandma so much and she loved you. Is that right?"

And, to the 16-year-old boy upset about not going out with his friends: "I know it makes you really angry when

we don't let you stay out later than your curfew. It's tough to have to be home earlier than your friends because you feel like you are missing out. But we feel that it's important that you come home at the time we decided. Do you have any ideas about how to make it easier?"

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