

Emotion coaching

Originally developed in the USA by John Gottman, a psychologist who observed that children who thrive in their emotional and social development have parents who respond positively to the behaviour of the children. He conducted research over many years to establish exactly the characteristics of adult responses that lead to emotional health in children, and to link these findings to the emerging research on the neurobiology of healthy brain development. As a result of his research, Dr Gottman was able to develop the concept of emotion coaching, an approach to behaviour which can be learned by parents. Research shows that emotion coaching produces many benefits for the health and well-being of the child. Emotion coached children:

- are more emotionally stable
- are more resilient
- achieve more academically
- are more popular
- have fewer behavioural problems
- have fewer infectious illnesses

In the UK Dr Janet Rose of Bath Spa University and her colleague Louise Gilbert built on the work of John Gottman to develop a practical tool to help anyone working with children and young people. They took this practical tool initially to 79 schools, and conducted research into the outcomes. They found a very high positive impact of emotion coaching on:

- the behaviour of the child or young person
- self-regulation in the adults working with the child or young person
- professional practice in the school

Emotion coaching is based on recognising that behaviour is driven by feelings. The key factors in adult responses leading to healthy neurological development in children are empathy and guidance. Analysing adult responses to behaviour in relation to these factors enables us to identify four main styles of response:

- **High empathy, high guidance**
 - **emotion coaching:** the adult is enabling the child to develop self-regulation of their feelings and to think about their behaviour
- **Low empathy, high guidance**
 - **disapproving:** the adult is addressing the behaviour, but without connecting with the child's feelings that drive the behaviour
- **Low empathy, low guidance**
 - **dismissing:** the adult is managing the situation by distracting the child from the feelings that drive the behaviour
- **High empathy, low guidance**
 - **laissez-faire:** the adult is being overwhelmed by the feelings of the child, and is unable to manage the behaviour, but may react by withdrawing or colluding or becoming enraged

■ kca resources

Emotion coaching is the most effective response to behaviour, but everyone can produce any of these styles in different situations and with different people. The aim of learning about emotion coaching is to increase the proportion of responses that are effective, not to achieve perfection. Janet Rose identifies three steps in using emotion coaching in practice:

- Recognise the feelings of the child, empathise, validate and name the feelings
- Set limits on the behaviour while maintaining empathy with the feelings
- Problem-solve with the child or young person

The latest understanding of the science of brain function makes it clear that emotion coaching is effective as a response to any human behaviour, not just that of children and young people. We all need to have our feelings recognised and validated if we are to be able to adapt and to manage our own behaviour appropriately. The research showed that emotion coaching produced benefits for staff as well as children, with improvements in overall well-being and emotional tone in the setting.