

Developing Resilience with Emotion Coaching

Helping children understand and reframe difficult emotions can go a long way to building resilience and countering unwanted behaviours. **Janet Rose** and **Louise Gilbert** share a powerful technique for helping both young people and adults improve their emotional intelligence.

Setting the scene

Recent UK directives increasingly emphasise the role of educational establishments in preventing mental health problems and promoting wellbeing.¹ Changes to the Ofsted School Inspection Handbook include new reference to pupils' emotional and mental health.² Indeed, parents have identified teachers as 'the ones who provided the most help in these situations in comparison with other groups such as family doctor and family friends'.³

However, the incentives and funding to support mental health and wellbeing objectives in education, social and health services have been reduced. Early intervention funding to local authorities fell by 55 per cent between 2010/11 and 2015/16 in the UK.⁴ In 2016, 90 per cent of secondary school head teachers reported

increases in anxiety and depression within schools, suggesting they 'are being forced to pick up the pieces as a result of cuts to community-based early intervention services, and a rising tide of mental ill-health'.⁵

The needs of children

For any child to be receptive to formal teaching and learning, they need to have physiological and psychological security in their environment and relationships.⁶ Accessing supportive relationships and environments in settings could be beneficial to sustain learning potential, particularly for children who are adversely affected by relational discord, violence and abuse.⁷ Indeed, for those with additional learning challenges to overcome, the classroom and school setting can lead to stress-related mental health difficulties, emotional disorders and subsequent behavioural difficulties.⁸ Children with specific learning difficulties (SpLD) have an increased risk of social isolation and behavioural problems, such as disruptive and aggressive behaviour in a co-concurrence with psycho-emotional problems.⁹ The inherent frustrations many SpLD children and young people experience in meeting the demands of the school environment may present as challenging behaviour. For example, behavioural disorders have a long-term association with reading difficulties.¹⁰

Current behavioural policies and practices which utilise the systems of sanction and reward do not necessarily address the complexities of social and emotional needs of children, particularly those who are high-risk or identified with SpLD. Therefore, attention is now being given to not only promoting behavioural, cognitive behavioural and systemic methods to support children and young people with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties, but also relational approaches.¹¹ The call for integrated universal support for pupils in schools is evidenced by meta-analyses that suggest that school staff are effective in delivering universal interventions to support pupil social and emotional learning¹² and by a survey of what schools in England do effectively to promote emotional well-being of their pupils.¹³

It is increasingly accepted that 'emotions matter to learning'.¹⁴ MacCann et al.'s research suggests better educational outcomes are achieved by 'targeting skills relating to emotion management and problem-focused coping', i.e. emotional and behavioural self-regulation.¹⁵ Davis highlights various studies which have shown how the quality of teacher-child relationships shape classroom experiences and influence children's social and cognitive development.¹⁶ How teachers respond to children's behaviour in particular can affect outcomes. For example, responsive, nurturing and attuned teachers are likely to diminish externalising or maladaptive behaviours.¹⁷ Through positive relationships, educators can engage the affective domain of their pupils' minds and attend to their affective needs to maximise learning at school.¹⁸

Sebba et al.'s (2015) report on the educational progress of Looked After Children in England concurs, having identified that children with social, emotional and mental health difficulties attributed their educational progress

to the characteristics, skills and commitment of individual teachers and carers... named individual teachers who knew what they were doing, persisted, engendered respect and genuinely cared... [and] identified others who were ineffective and insensitive.¹⁹

Their report advocated that alternative initiatives, such as Emotion Coaching, need to become more widely known and researched in schools.

What is Emotion Coaching?

Gottman et al. coined the term *Emotion Coaching* to describe a parenting style that correlates with children's academic achievement and social and emotion regulation.²⁰ Two key elements are foundational to the approach – *empathy and guidance* – which



express themselves through various processes which adults undertake whenever 'emotional moments' occur. Emotional empathy involves recognising, labelling and validating a child's emotions, regardless of the behaviour, in order to promote self-awareness and understanding of emotions. Such acceptance by the adult of the child's internal emotional state creates a context of responsiveness and security and helps the child to engage with more reasonable solutions. The circumstances might also require setting limits on appropriate behaviour (such as stating clearly what is acceptable behaviour) and possible consequential action (such as implementing behaviour management procedures) – but key to this process is *guidance*: engagement with the child in problem-solving in order to support the child's ability to learn to self-regulate. The child and adult work together to seek alternative courses of action to help manage emotions and prevent future transgressions. This process is adaptable and responsive to the developmental capabilities of the child, with the adult scaffolding pro-social solutions and differentiating where necessary. By enabling children to tune in more explicitly to their emotions and problem-solve solutions that will help them to manage such feelings, and the behavioural consequences of those feelings, the child is engaged in pro-actively enhancing social and emotional competences. It also supports the child's development of 'meta-emotion', which refers to the 'organised set of feelings and cognitions about one's own emotions and the emotions of others', i.e. emotional intelligence.²¹ Thus, Emotion Coaching helps to instil the tools that will aid children's ability to self-regulate their emotions and behaviour.²²

The main research evidence base for Emotion Coaching comes from the United States and Australia. Randomised controlled trials by Havighurst et al.,²³ and by Gottman et al.²⁴ indicate that Emotion-Coached children have fewer behavioural problems, achieve more academically, are more emotionally stable and resilient,

are more popular and have fewer infectious illnesses. Emotion coaching has been successfully used with normative and atypical-development child populations, including children with behavioural difficulties,²⁵ depression²⁶ and those exposed to violent environments, including inter-parental physical abuse, maltreatment and community conflict.²⁷ Emotion Coaching has also been positively correlated with secure attachments,²⁸ and used effectively to reduce the externalising behaviours of children with ASD.²⁹ It has also recently been identified as a protective factor for children with ODD³⁰ and for children at risk.³¹

Emotion Coaching in educational settings: The beginnings


As a relational approach, Emotion Coaching was adapted for use in UK community and educational settings as an alternative paradigm to behavioural or 'high-control' methods.³² In 2011, the UK's first-ever two phased, mixed-method pilot study, the Melksham 0-19 Resiliency Project (MRP 0-19), assessed the suitability of training community and educational practitioners in an adapted version of Emotion Coaching.³³ The study rested on the premise that supportive adults, other than parents, could individually and collectively empower children and young people to build a repertoire of internal and external socio-emotional regulatory skills that promote prosocial behaviour. Participants were recruited from early years' settings, schools and a youth centre within a disadvantaged rural town and a vulnerable rural area with a high population of military families. Participants included senior and junior teaching staff, teaching assistants, school support staff, SENCos, Children's Service staff, including health and social care services, early years' practitioners, youth workers and youth mentors, and some parents.


In the pilot study, participants were trained in Emotion Coaching techniques to adopt, adapt and sustain Emotion Coaching into their practice over a period of one year.

Emotion Coaching was originally presented to practitioners as a three-step sequence (condensing Gottman's five-step approach), however, after the pilot research, this was changed to a four-step approach (as seen below in Figure 1).

What this means in practice

- **Step 1**
Recognising the child's feelings and empathising with them
- **Step 2**
Validating the feelings and labelling them
- **Step 3**
Setting limits on behaviour (if needed)
- **Step 4**
Problem-solve with the child



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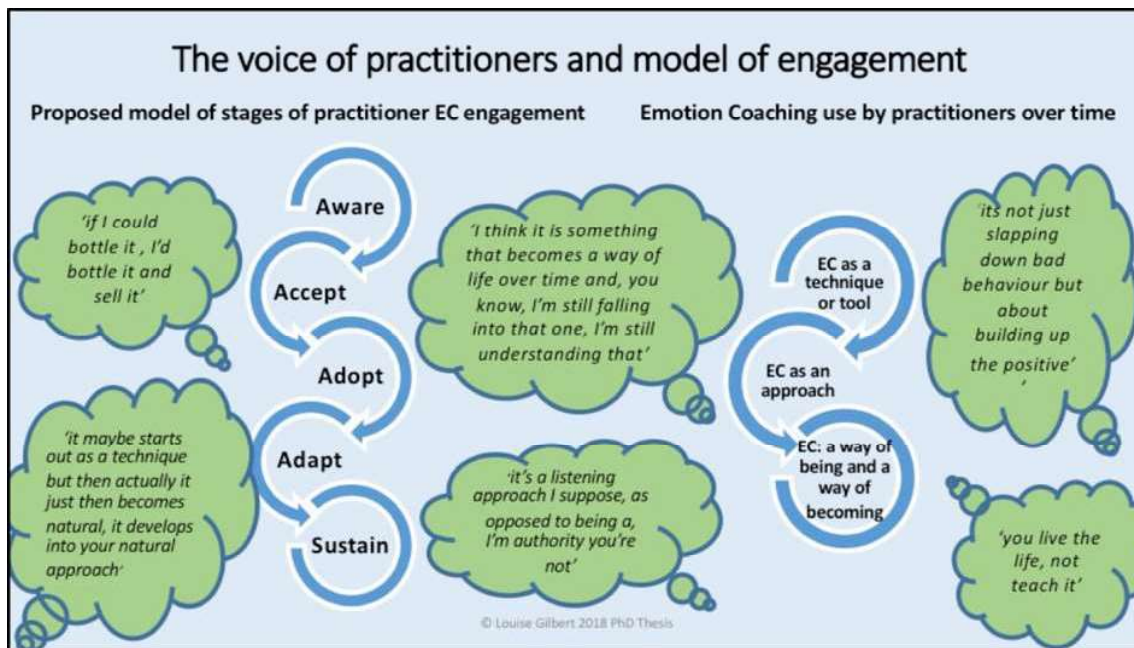
The four steps of Emotion Coaching for Educational settings

Findings from the study demonstrated the applicability of utilising Emotion Coaching to support children experiencing ‘emotional moments’ which manifested in challenging behaviour in educational settings. Statistically significant improvements were found in the following three areas:

Adults’ attitudes to children’s behaviour suggesting that the adults adopted a more Emotion-Coaching style and became less ‘dismissive’ of children’s emotions, generating a more relational model of behaviour management
Improving professional practice in relation to dealing with behavioural incidents, the way Emotion Coaching improves children’s behaviour and ability to regulate their behaviour, and the way in which it helps adults to manage children’s behaviour, including the way in which it improves staff well-being and efficacy
There was also a significant difference in all children’s behaviour indicators (call-outs, exclusions, consequences/sanctions), indicating that Emotion Coaching reduced behavioural incidents.
Statistically significant findings from the use of Emotion Coaching in educational settings,³⁴

Alongside the Melksham project, a small piece of doctoral research investigated the practitioners’ emotion coaching experiences.³⁵ It found that practitioners used Emotion Coaching as both a technique to manage incidents of behavioural dysregulation as well as an approach to holistically inform their everyday practice. The use of Emotion Coaching varied as a result of teaching experience, emotional awareness and practitioner’s meta-emotion beliefs and opportunity to practise.³⁶ With increasing practise, Emotion Coaching became adapted for use in other teaching and learning incidents and eventually a preferred practice approach. Therefore, Emotion Coaching could be described as ‘a way of being to a way of becoming’.³⁷ An incrementally accumulative and staged model of Emotion Coaching engagement evidenced the importance of the ongoing role of practitioner emotional awareness, the acceptance of the premise ‘emotions matter to learning’, the adoption and then adaption of Emotion Coaching into practice experience and the role of senior management commitment and setting culture to sustain Emotion Coaching integration.⁸

Emotion Coaching, the voices of practitioner and model of engagement (Gilbert, 2018)





Developing the research evidence-base for Emotion Coaching

Although still nascent, Emotional Coaching in educational settings is proliferating and a number of further studies have yielded similar results to the first pilot study in England. The Attachment Aware Schools (AAS) project aimed to promote vulnerable pupils' emotional, social and academic wellbeing with Emotion Coaching utilised as a whole-school strategy. Two of the AAS pilot projects, commissioned by two local authority virtual schools in 2014, noted improvements in pupils' academic achievement scores, significant decrease in exclusions and significant reduction in challenging behaviours. Practitioners also noted increased confidence in dealing with challenging behaviour, which impacted positively on professional practice and self-regulation.³⁹ Case studies also identified that practitioner-modelling encouraged parents to use Emotion Coaching at home, and the shared practice reinforced a consistent, supportive, approach for the child. The use of Emotion Coaching could be described as 'a vehicle for facilitating supportive home-school collaborative partnerships with positive outcomes for vulnerable children and young people'.⁴⁰

Another small pilot study in an independent SEMH specialist provision primary day school, arose from a dissatisfaction with the traditional behavioural-based approaches to support pupil progress: for example, using rewards, choice and natural consequences. The staff believed that this approach did not fully support the emotional difficulties experienced by the pupils. After attending an Attachment and Trauma training course, the SLT introduced an attachment-informed relational approach, using Emotion Coaching as the basis for all communication and teaching about emotions to support the development of their pupils' behaviour and learning.⁴¹

All pupils had statements of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan and 25 per cent of the children were from disadvantaged backgrounds. All school staff were trained in Emotion Coaching via in-house training delivered by the SLT. This included SLT modelling Emotion Coaching, providing Emotion Coaching 'scripts' for staff to use if needed, positively noticing when other staff members used EC, group discussions and personal one to one supervision. To support the adoption of EC, staff were encouraged to focus on using Emotion Coaching with one particular child. Once it was embedded as an approach, Emotion Coaching was then cascaded to the families, through school staff, who modelled Emotion Coaching in their interactions with families, and via individual support for families in using Emotion Coaching with their children and through family group training/information sessions at school. A range of data was collected from the school and generated the following positive results:

- the rates of pupil restraint decreased
- pupils made better-than-expected academic progress
- staff absenteeism reduced
- families reported improved family life⁴²

Further evidence from another pilot scheme in Somerset⁴³ also implemented Emotion Coaching as a key strategy to increase understanding of emotional health and wellbeing, enhance skills in supporting children and young people's emotional health and wellbeing, facilitate the referral process for children and young people and improve access to health and specialist services. It introduced Emotion Coaching into primary and secondary schools in southwest England. Echoing the findings from other studies, practitioners felt all relationships were improved with Emotion Coaching and a person-focused culture emerged. The data also showed how practitioners became less emotionally dismissive in their practice and there was a significant improvement noted in practitioner emotional self-regulation and awareness that correlated strongly with improved staff empathy and patience. Emotion Coaching provided a framework to support practitioners in managing their own emotional self-regulation and strengthened partnerships by cascading evidence-based activities on integrating Emotion Coaching into practice. A county-wide sustainable Emotion Coaching network reflects how different services can work together to support children and young people's emotional health.⁴⁴

What do educational setting-focused Emotion Coaching research findings suggest?

Three key themes have emerged as a result of using Emotion Coaching in educational settings and these are:

Theme 1 – Professional Practice: Emotion Coaching enables adults to communicate more effectively and consistently with children in stressful situations, to utilise fewer 'emotion dismissing' approaches, and helps to de-escalate volatile situations. For example, one participant noted, 'Emotion coaching acts as a framework and a script that enables a consistent, positive approach' to behavioural incidents without going 'down the cul-de-sac of blame'.

Theme 2 – Adult Self-regulation: Through using Emotion Coaching, adults found difficult situations less stressful and exhausting with a positive impact on adult wellbeing, 'It helps us cool down while we collect our thoughts and I now shout less!', 'I am more patient now' and 'I now focus on emotions as well as the behaviour and give time to validating emotions – it helps us all be reflective about our inner selves'.

Theme 3 – Behavioural Impact on Child: Emotion Coaching promotes children's self-awareness of their emotions, positive self-regulation of their behaviour and generates nurturing relationships. A common belief reported was that Emotion Coaching supports children to calm down and better understand their emotions, as evidenced by this observation: 'It releases huge burdens for some children who struggle with emotional control – they have been able to settle more quickly after an incident and have been confident in being able to say "can I speak to you?" without worrying about a negative response'.

The implementation of Emotion Coaching into practice is not without its challenges. Practitioners identified time issues and difficulties in convincing other staff in their attempts to embed and disseminate Emotion Coaching. Nonetheless, the findings from these pilot studies suggest Emotion Coaching can be a valuable tool for practitioners in their work with children and young people. The reported improvements in adult self-regulation during behavioural incidents and enhanced social relationships with children and young people have important implications for professional practice, particularly for adults who support children with SpLD. There are consistent findings that Emotion Coaching can lead to a reduction in disruptive behaviour and a positive impact on behavioural regulation (improved pro-social behaviour) by the children/young people across the settings. The common participant claims of how Emotion Coaching helps to generate a more consistent response to behavioural incidents resonates with literature, highlighting the important of consistent responsiveness in promoting social and cognitive growth.⁴⁵ The frequent descriptions by participants of the way in which Emotion Coaching de-escalates incidents and helps both the children/young people and adults to



'calm down' suggests improvements in the stress response system and reflects how children/young people (and adults) felt more able to regulate their emotional responses. The narrative provided by Emotion Coaching creates a communicative context for a child's emotional experiences to be explicitly and meaningfully processed within a relational dyad. We suggest that Emotion Coaching operates as a stabilising factor to enable children with SpLD to focus their energies on learning and to help them moderate the challenges of school.

Emotion-Coaching-trained practitioners appear well-positioned to provide the tools for children to self-regulate their emotions, reduce negative externalising behaviour and promote learning. Nurturing and emotionally supportive relationships provide prime contexts to improve current emotional state, enhance capacity for future self-regulation and promote resiliency skills.⁴⁶ Oatley and Johnson-Laird believe that *emotions are* 'both the glue and the gunpowder of human social relations'⁴⁷ and the research evidence to date suggests that 'Emotion Coaching makes the glue stronger and the gunpowder less explosive'.⁴⁸

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